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THE END OF THE WORLD.

By Rev. BENJAMIN WISNER BACON,

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The idea of a universal conflagration, or final catastrophe, reducing the visible universe to chaos, has been for centuries the sting of the world's guilty conscience, making cowards of the race. If the doctrine of resurrection brought deliverance to many "who through the fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage," there was a something else which, if not Christian, at least appeared almost simultaneously with Christianity, and from the same quarter, and went hand in hand with it in all its conquests; a something which brought in a hitherto unknown fear and a new bondage. If in the bosom of the individual Christian life and immortality were brought to light and the grave robbed of its terrors, there was also a

Dies irae, dies illa

Solvat saeculum in favilla,

which brought the chill of mortal terror upon the community. In spite of its good news to men, that is a true witness of the Christian conquest which is borne by Lecky, the historian of European soul-life in its transition from a classic to a Christian basis, that the net result of the introduction of Christianity was to extinguish what remained of the old joyous temperament of heathendom, and to spread a shroud of gloom over the civilized world. Asceticism was piety; its motive, "Flee from the wrath to come."*

Jesus had taught a kingdom of God "within you," a golden age for humanity attainable by the submission of all hearts to the law of love. His kingdom of God was a glorification of nature, a regeneration of the creation, a peaceful transformation of the world from the domain of discord to the dwelling place of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. The kingdom was not to come with observa-

* See Lecky, *History of European Morals*. Chap. I.

tion. As fast as the Spirit of unselfishness found lodgment in human hearts would come the manifestation of the sons of God, which would be the redemption the creation groans for. The kingdom of God which he taught his disciples to pray for was a submission of human hearts to the law of love, till the will of God should be "done on earth even as it is done in heaven." In behalf of this spiritual and practicable ideal, and in protest against its degradation into the mechanical, supernatural, and totally impracticable ideal of his fellow-countrymen, whose conception of the kingdom of God was the intervention of the *deus ex machina* in behalf of God's supposed favorites, and the destruction of the heathen, Jesus sacrificed his own life, and demanded a readiness in his disciples to sacrifice their lives. The narrative of the wilderness temptations is but a shadow cast before from the one great temptation in threefold form which beset him throughout his career, with which the later Synoptists fill up the blanks of that unknown period of seclusion. The perversion of his career from its true spiritual purpose to mere physical benefit is the temptation to which he is exposed by the importunities of the multitude clamoring for loaves and fishes and for cures. But this is not the purpose for which he came (Mark 1: 35-39). The prostitution of the strange power of blessing with which he finds himself endowed into mere miracle-mongering for the silencing of the skeptical is the temptation with which he is beset by the Pharisees who came "tempting him and seeking from him a sign from heaven." But the incarnation of evil appears in all its nakedness, demanding worship of him, when the popular demand for the carnal Messiah of force, of national pride, of Judaic expectation, finds voice in Peter, the very spokesman and leader of the apostles. This the supreme temptation, and the worst perversion of his calling presents itself in the very hour when Peter has just recognized his divine calling as the Christ, and he on his part, has accepted the confession as of God, a call to go up to Jerusalem, suffer many things and be crucified. Then perhaps for the only time Jesus said, "Get thee behind me Satan." Satanic influence to him means the suggestion of a Messianic career which "savoureth not of

the things that be of God, but the things that be of men." Everywhere this conception of the Messianic rôle according to the things that be of men, confronted him, baffled him, crucified him. Everywhere it is met by him with the spiritual ideal, redemption for the world in the realization of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man; and withal not suddenly, but "as the seed which is cast upon the earth springeth up and groweth even while the husbandman sleeps, so is the kingdom of God, first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear."

Whatever may be thought of other New Testament passages which profess to set forth the teaching of Jesus in regard to his kingdom, its character and the time and method of its accomplishment, the above will be recognized as at least *a* characteristic representation from the teaching of Jesus, if not *the* characteristic representation. In contrast with it we cannot fail to recognize either the antithesis of the spiritual kingdom, the conventional kingdom of God of the false Christs which "should immediately appear." Its representations were drawn almost exclusively from Daniel and a few of the more sanguinary Messianic expectations of the Psalmists, so far, indeed as it depended upon canonical prophecy. Its preliminaries are the gathering of the Gentiles against the Holy City, the assault of Gog and Magog, terrible distresses, followed by the appearance of the Messiah from the wilderness at the head of a faithful host, the waters of Jordan cleaving open before them and the walls of Jerusalem falling down at the sound of their trumpets, or, as otherwise conceived, the splitting open of the Mt. of Olives and appearance of a celestial army for the relief of the beloved city. In either case the central scene is the rolling back of the clouds of heaven as the Son of Man is brought into the midst of the celestial conclave and installed by Jehovah upon the Davidic throne. The trumpets then summon all peoples, which now have made their submission to the Messiah and his army, to a general judgment. Jehovah executes vengeance for his people; the dead (or some of them) are raised and come into the Holy City and the theocratic kingdom in its ideal form is made permanent. Jerusalem (the new Jeru-

salem) becomes the metropolis of the world. All this is in the rôle of Messiah as it is understood by the Jew of the 1st century. A forsaking of this rôle by one who had undertaken the character of Messiah, is treason and blasphemy in one; a crime which crucifixion alone can expiate. It is in opposition to this that the teachings of Jesus are uttered; but not in opposition to the people only. It is his disciples who think that the kingdom of heaven is immediately to appear, while they are in the way going up to Jerusalem. It is his disciples who shout hosannas for the coming "kingdom of their father David," while he is weeping over the fate of the city that is destroyed because it "knows not the things that belong to peace." It is his disciples who are convinced that their "hope that this was he which should have redeemed Israel" was a mere delusion, when he came not down from the cross; his disciples who welcome his resurrection principally as the guarantee that their expectations of the *Deus ex machina* are not really dispelled even by the crucifixion, but only postponed,—momentarily postponed—since they greet him immediately with the question "Lord, wilt thou at *this* time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Again let me defer the question whether the actual teaching of Jesus was a plain denial of these conventional and mechanical expectations, or a mere putting of them aside into the indefinite future which neither he nor they could know of, (Mark 13: 32) with practical exhortations to watch, and work and pray till the end should come, whether at the cock-crowing or noon or night.

That is a question of literary history and criticism. For the present what we need to ask is this. Do the two representations of the restitution of all things which appear in the New Testament, side by side, the apocalyptic, with its *deus ex machina*, signs in heaven, falling of the stars to the earth and extinction of sun and moon, trumpet of archangel, rolling away of the celestial vault like a scroll curled up from the extremities, setting up of throne and judgment seat in the clouds and visible intervention of the Almighty to execute judgment; and the spiritual, which declares that "*this* is the judgment, that light is come into the world and men

loved darkness rather than light," "Now is the judgment of this world," which sees the operation of God in the gradual evolution of humanity under the law of love into a human-divine fellowship,—do these two conceptions belong together, or are they really incompatible? And if the latter, which is to be regarded as the essentially Christian and which is Judaistic? Even if the teachings and parables of Jesus seem to admit and tolerate the apocalyptic ideas and expectations of the period, merely postponing them to the unknown future and not denying them outright but rather falling in with them, as they certainly fall in with and accommodate themselves to the current beliefs in regard to demoniac possession, which are we to regard as the really and essentially Christian, the doctrine of "the kingdom of God which is within you?" or the kingdom "which appeareth as the lightning and shineth from the East even unto the West?" Which should we regard as the characteristic promise of Jesus to his disciples, "Ye shall be the children of the Highest, for he showeth kindness even to the unthankful and the evil?" or, "When the Son of Man shall appear in his glory ye shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel?" And when this question is answered we have still to ask, What allowance must be made for a coloration of the reports of Jesus' teaching during its transmission orally for some 40 years through minds saturated with the cruder, more materialistic apocalyptic ideas of Judaism? That which should be plain in regard to the eschatological features of the New Testament is that the attitude of Jesus, even in the passages attributed to him which seem to take the apocalyptic standpoint, was at least a negative one. From the pages of the New Testament alone it is sufficiently obvious that the idea of the kingdom of God which cometh with observation is the survival of Judaism; whereas the positive and characteristic teaching of Jesus is that it is "within you," is spiritual, is a conquest of God over man by the instillation of the Spirit of love, and not by outward signs from heaven.

Now, persistently as the church has struggled to hold these two conceptions together, and great as are the abilities

of the theologians for maintaining simultaneously two or more mutually exclusive and contradictory propositions, the effort to preserve together the Rabbinic and the Christian idea of the kingdom is fruitless. The new wine will surely burst—has already burst—the old wine-skins. The kingdom of God is not at once spiritual and material. The judgment of God is not at the same time a judgment operated, perfected, complete, in each human heart, either when the supreme choice is made, and the Christian is justified by faith while the sinner chooses darkness rather than light, or, as others will have it, at the hour of death; and then, over and above this spiritual judgment, a general assize at the end of the world, with hail of stars and general conflagration, Gabriel's trumpet, thrones, books and other paraphernalia of the Roman or Jewish court-room, a summons to the elect to come and hear by formal sentence that they are justly entitled to the glory which they have been already enjoying for so and so many thousands of years, and to the damned to come and be damned over again for the spectacular effect of it. The new and spiritual will inevitably supplant the old and crudely material. No intelligent modern Christian, who has made the attempt to realize to his own mind what he meant by the general judgment, but has found himself tending irresistably to spiritualize these crude conceptions (though in the apocalyptic literature they were by no means mere metaphors), by the simple elimination of all time and space relations.*

The Rabbinic and the Christian, the apocalyptic and the spiritual are not one but two; and not only two, but antagonistic. Nevertheless it is not the latter but the former conception which immediately and perhaps inevitably assumed the ascendant in the early church. From the moment that

*The religious instinct of Horace Bushnell impelled him to discard as purely figurative the Judaistic eschatological element from the New Testament representation of the consummation of all things. Sensitive to the contradiction, though comparatively uninformed as to the source of these cruder ideas, since literary criticism and the comparative study of the apocalyptic literature of the age were to him practically a *terra incognita*, he yet felt that these ideas were unworthy to serve as anything more than a pictorial setting to the teachings of Jesus. See "Forgiveness and Law" Scribner, Armstrong and Co. 1874. p. 247.

Jesus is parted from them they stand gazing up into heaven, expecting the clouds to bring him immediately with power and great glory. Communistic living becomes easy, and Jerusalem, not Galilee becomes the headquarters; for is it not there that the Son of Man is soon to appear "with the ten thousand of his holy ones?" From Jerusalem to Rome all eyes are turned toward heaven, and the universal watchword is *Maranatha*, "the Lord is at hand." Some "have ceased to work with their hands, and are become busybodies," waiting for the impending day of Jehovah in idleness; others weep for friends caught away by death before they could witness the coming of the Son of Man. Paul himself, the theologian of the Rabbinic schools, even while he rebukes the idle and comforts the disappointed, does so with the confident assurance "that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep, because the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first, then we that are alive that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall ever be with the Lord."

How indeed could it be otherwise? Could the thousands of Jews who believed disembarass themselves in a moment from the whole framework of religious thought of a lifetime? Was the alteration of their religious ideas accomplished by sheer miracle? If Christ's very apostles had gone even to the foot of the cross expecting every moment the rending of the sky and the appearance of "more than ten legions of angels," would the mere fact of his death dispel this hope and expectation? In one case it might; if they abandoned him altogether. But if they still clung to him it must needs be with the assured conviction that these things were but the darkness before the dawn, a characteristic of all Messianic expectation, and that they would soon behold him "coming with the clouds, and every eye should see him and they who pierced him;" the believers would be caught up to meet him in the air, and then the conventional program of the Messiah would be carried out.

From the time of the resurrection the *motif* of a large part of Christian literature becomes either a renewed assurance that the end of all things is at hand, or an explanation of the delay upon one pretext or another, to silence those who begin to ask, "Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation."

The last, the very last of that generation which clung in the most literal sense to the promise, "Verily, I say unto you there be some standing here which shall not taste of death till they see the Son of Man coming in his glory," together with other corroboratory assurances of the same import, passed away, and still the church found an explanation. Centuries passed away, and still the day of the Lord was assuredly just before, only delayed by "the long-suffering of God" designed to afford opportunity "that all should come unto repentance." It would surely come as a thief. "In it the heavens shall pass away with a great noise and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up." At last the slow centuries receding, brought the millennium, the long expected "thousand years." All Europe stood benumbed with fear. Christendom repeated the folly of the Thessalonians and left off its work to walk about for a short time in ascension robes. Then it doffed them to don the mason's apron, and cathedral spires pierced the heavens that had remained obdurately closed to the realistic aspirations of the saints. Considering the greatness of the disappointment Christendom was very cheerful. It was like a vast sigh of relief that went up from the world, when it became a clear case that the coming of the Lord was not yet.

What boots it to detail the later excuses and explanations, the manipulation of numbers, the calculations from Daniel and Revelation, the discovery of that which the Son of Man confessed his ignorance of, in the *abracadabra* of Talmudic cabbalistics, or the scratches and dust of the great Pyramid?

How much longer will the church stand gazing up into heaven while its work on earth remains undone? How much longer will it continue to seek its Lord among the clouds of

heaven instead of in the hearts of men? How long before it will learn that the kingdom of heaven is spiritual, "cometh not with observation," "is within you?" How long before it learns that these visions of falling stars, opening heavens, archangelic trumpets, armies of Gog and Magog, winepresses of divine wrath and Messianic vengeance, baths of blood up to the horses' bridles, are the fruit, not of the gospel of peace, but of Jewish hatred and insane pride, born of the fanaticism of the Pharisee and zealot, in response to the fiendish oppression of an Antiochus Epiphanes and the long slavery of Rome? When will the church learn to know what is the truth as it is in Jesus, and what the must and rust of decaying rabbinism?